

## BRESSON ON THE COUCH

**This essay is a review of 'Bresson par Bresson: Entretiens (1943-1983)' edited by Mylène Bresson and published by Flammarion, Paris 2013. Length: 4200 words.**

### Synopsis

*Introduction: Bresson's success in the 'Sight and Sound' poll of 2012 – his anti-system and 'Notes on the Cinematographer' – is his method superseded by the current fashion for lauding theatrical performance in the cinema?*

*These interviews allow a more expansive understanding of what he was trying to achieve, and of how his thinking evolved over his career. Six things come into focus: 1) the division between his long-gestated projects and his much more rapidly achieved adaptations; 2) his adhesion to the Catholic faith; 3) his courtesy, reticence and modesty; 4) the autobiographical nuggets revealed; 5) his taste for classical literature; 6) the importance of improvisation.*

*Conclusion: The overall value of the book is immense but it must be understood as 'Selected Interviews' – the continuing importance of his ideas.*

Every 10 years the UK film magazine 'Sight and Sound' polls critics and filmmakers for their ten best films. And in 2012 which filmmaker had more films in the top 250 than anyone else? Because you are in the Bresson section of my website you know that the answer is Robert Bresson, although your first thought might have been Hitchcock, or Godard, or Spielberg, or others. But yes, the answer is Bresson with one film in the top 20 (*Au Hasard Balthazar*) and two in the top 100 (*Pickpocket* and *Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé / A Man Escaped*). What is more his hit rate is outstanding, since these seven films come from a corpus of only thirteen features.

It is surprising that he should have done so well, and in a way it is surprising he has any films in the top 250. That he does may be because the poll was of critics and film-makers, people who watch or make films, whether popular or esoteric, for a living. This electorate would certainly applaud the narrative excitement of his films (an extraordinary prison escape in *A Man Escaped*, the ballet of pickpocketing hands in *Pickpocket*, how to make cars skid off the road in *Au Hasard Balthazar*, the mediaeval tournament in *Lancelot du lac*, the way 'one small transgression precipitates an avalanche of evil' in *L'Argent*). But unlike the general public, they would admire his method, or as he called it on one occasion, his 'anti-system'. That is to say, the use of unfamiliar faces; the counterpointing of images with voices and sounds; the obsession with the non-theatrical in pursuit of the 'involuntary expressive'; narratives of effects rather than causes; and finally – and perhaps most shockingly – the very sparing use of added music, which initially he used only to 'transform the image' and then latterly abandoned altogether. These aesthetic principles run extraordinarily counter to a culture in which performance on screen is for many people what they chiefly look for in a film, and where films are drowned in music.

Bresson was insistent throughout his life that his aesthetic approach, which he called 'cinematography' to distinguish it from the 'filmed spectacle' he found in contemporary films, was fundamental to the development of narrative cinema as an art. In 1975 his 'Notes on the cinematographer' was published in French, with an English translation appearing in 1986. This is his 'technical book', first crystallising in his mind in the mid-1950s around the time of *A Man Escaped* when the how of his film-making began to become clearer in his mind, and then taking twenty years to write, as good an example as any in his life of his thoughtfulness and his search for precision.

On first encounter the 'Notes' are maddening, a collage of thoughts, randomly put together, that seem actively to oppose themselves to rational understanding. They are *pensée*-like (and Pascal's 'Pensées' must surely have been the inspiration behind the way the ideas are presented) which makes them epigrammatic, aphoristic, oracular even. But seeing Bresson's films, and films in general, helps one to return to these ideas to appreciate not just their originality but their force. As time goes on, they gain a monumental, enduring quality so that, like the Roman poet Horace, Bresson could boast (not that he did) that not just in his films but with this book, 'I have made a monument more lasting than bronze.'

Yet Bresson was to be disappointed – at least up to now, although time is on his side one might add. For while he is admired by a number of filmmakers and by many critics, as the 'Sight and Sound' poll attests, his cinematography has not led to a school or style. In the 1960s he had high hopes for films made outside the official means of production with cheap cameras and tape-recorders, 'far from the contagion of the studio'. In 1966 he even went so far as to pronounce: 'I firmly believe in cinematography as a serious art-form, not an entertainment (*divertissement*). On the contrary it will be a means of making the world profound, a kind of aid in making mankind more profound, perhaps even a means of discovery.' By 1974, these hopes had faded badly: 'I make no demands on anyone to follow me.' In the same year, in 'Le Figaro' newspaper, he wrote that his cinematography had nothing in common with the 'filmed spectacles' which people have been happy with for 50 years. 'I am astonished at being almost the only one to argue this.'

Bresson's interviews given to magazines and the newspapers have been in a scholarly but inaccessible domain ever since they appeared, but it is immensely welcome that they have been brought together by his widow, Mylène Bresson, in a single book, 'Bresson par Bresson: Entretiens 1943-83' (Flammarion, Paris 2013). The first thing to strike the reader is the wonderful complement they make to the 'Notes' in two ways. First, the interview gave Bresson a chance to be much fuller in his explanations of what he was trying to do. Second, they allow us to trace the evolution of his thinking: from the 'Notes' one might think his ideas were fixed, but the interviews not only show the way they evolved over his career, but that even after the publication of his technical book in 1975, they continued to do so. This gives an intriguing narrative trajectory to the book. Certainly he repeats himself, but attention needs to be paid each time to the words he uses in order to spot the nuances.

#### **What emerges? Six things in particular struck me.**

**First**, the way some of his projects underwent a long gestation time while his adaptations happened much more quickly. The opportunity to make *Mouchette* came to him following the remarkable critical success of *Au Hasard Balthazar*, and the adaptation was done in eight days. *Balthazar* itself had been in his mind for fifteen years as 'a project abandoned, taken up again, abandoned, then taken up because of the obstacles to its composition'. This may refer to the difficulty of getting finance but is more likely to mean that he could not put the story together to his satisfaction.

More notoriously still his *Lancelot du lac* of 1974 was written in the years between *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1945) and *Le Journal d'un curé de champagne / Diary of a Country Priest* (1950), so that he had had to wait some 25 years before he could find a producer willing to put up the money, Bresson having realised that it was going to be more costly to make than any of his other films. What is so interesting about this is that surely a *Lancelot du lac* of 1950 would have been very different in tone to the one he finally made in 1974, where the failure to find the Grail stands in for the absence of God (although not his non-existence, as Bresson is at pains to point out). Even more famously, Bresson had long wanted to make a film of the Book of Genesis (from the Creation to the episode of the Tower of Babel) ever since he had been in discussion about it in the 1960s with the Italian producer, Dino de Laurentiis, a relationship that seems to have gone sour. In the middle of 1983, following *L'Argent*, he talked of seeking financing for it in the United States. In this case, however, the project was never realised and it is our loss.

**Secondly**, even more problematic than his ideas on cinematography is his adhesion to the Catholic faith. The interviews shed a much clearer light on this. Taken for granted in the 1940s (*Les Anges du péché* is set in a nunnery) and the 1950s (*Diary of a Country Priest*; *A Man Escaped* with its core idea of grace and salvation; the redemption story of *Pickpocket* derived from Dostoevsky's 'Crime and Punishment'), in the 1960s and 1970s in the face of a new despair in his films he seems to have felt obliged to affirm it in interviews, possibly because he wished to be clear on the point, possibly because his interviewers, reflecting the cultural shift of faith going out of fashion, begin to probe him more. 'I am Catholic' (1966). 'My faith is simple' (1967). 'I am a Christian film-maker' (1974). There is a constant reiteration in his belief in the soul, and in an afterlife. This is essential to understanding the ending of *Mouchette*, where the abandoned Mouchette drowns herself to the sound of Monteverdi's Magnificat, an ending he defended against the reproach of despair: 'That is not true for me who believe in the soul and in God,' the use of Monteverdi enveloping the film with Christianity. 'It had to be.' By contrast, the ending of his next film, *Quatre Nuits d'un rêveur*, in which Jacques having fallen in love with Marthe is suddenly, capriciously even, abandoned by her and left alone with his paintings and his tape recorder, Bresson called pessimistic, 'not a sad pessimism yet so much more bitter' (than *Balthazar*, *Mouchette* and *Une Femme Douce*, which all end with the death of the central protagonist).

A high-water mark for his Catholicizing seems to have been *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc / The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962). Martyrdom is a theme common to virtually all his films, and with *Les Anges du péché*, *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Jeanne d'Arc* it is overtly Christian, while Joan's agony is in his view analogous with Christ's Passion. Bresson seems to have been swept off his feet when he read the detailed account of her trial (in Champion's edition of 1920/21), which included many of her actual words, and he concluded from it that she was a superior being, 'hurling her obstinate replies' from the material realm into the spiritual one. This intersection of the spiritual with the temporal is echoed in the intriguing fact that Bresson was asked to show his film to the cardinals and bishops convened for the Second Vatican Council. His interviewer calls it a curious coincidence that the film was made just when the Catholic Church was pondering its destiny, to which Bresson replies, 'It is a mysterious coincidence,' and although he does not elaborate on this, we are left to chase the thought: pure chance, or the workings of divine grace?

No doubt he felt that a new dawn was coming up, and that he was happy to be making films as it did so. Twenty years later he finds himself on the defensive: 'The word pessimism annoys me because it is often used instead of lucidity. Cocteau used to speak of happy pessimists; perhaps I am one of them.' Yet there is no doubt that in his last two films, both on contemporary French society, the air of defeat hangs heavy. In the 1970s he became very troubled by the despoliation of the planet among a litany of ills which he expounded in *Le Diable, probablement*: toxic mud, slaughter of seals, destruction of forests, galloping population growth, the atomic peril, the decline of church and state, drug addiction, the false consolation of psychoanalysis. For someone who didn't want to preach, 'only to show', *Le Diable, probablement* introduces the idea of the presence of the devil in the world, a presence which he had detected twice in his life. 'It's quite natural that behind the mess made of everything, I have detected the devil and that my film has become what it is.' All that is left is his faith in youth, something that had attracted him to the subject of Joan of Arc. In 1971 he eulogised young people, at least those who sought a sort of salvation in non-action and who refused to participate in a society 'scandalously founded on money and profit, on war and fear'. In the light of these sentiments, it is shocking still that it is the young in *L'Argent* who in their act of making a fast franc are primarily responsible for the destruction of Yvon. Bresson, whom detractors might accuse of being backward-looking in his outlook, here finds a prophetic voice about the role of money in contemporary culture, the 'abominable false god'.

The **third** thing to emerge from the interviews is not just his courtesy, but his reticence and modesty as well, qualities which take on particular strength when they are used for the steely articulation of his views. Constantly one has the impression that he had thought of the answer before the question was asked. If there is anything venomous or contemptuous, the nearest we come to it is when he says that he is happy for *Au Hasard Balthazar* to be in competition at the Venice Film Festival. 'Cannes is not for me, it's for the other

cinema, that of the stars.' Nor too, for a man who took such a sombre view of the world, is the book without some lightness. He tells a very good story about *Pickpocket*: when he was researching it, he sought the help of the police and together they went on the hunt for pickpockets during the Grand Prix at Longchamp race course. Unfortunately this was 1958, when the race coincided with the International World Fair at Brussels, so he saw nothing: 'All the pickpockets were in Brussels.' And when a member of the public expressed concern that the pickpocketing sequence in the rail station should be censored because it looked so documentary, Bresson shot back: 'It's also a way of warning people to look after their wallets.'

**Fourthly**, these interviews can be mined for their autobiographical nuggets. For example, in the 1930s he had been a painter (long well-known) but he remarks on how solitary a profession it is, a fact which links so well with the way his protagonists exist in a sort of solitude. He had been a POW of the Germans in 1940 (again well-known) which explains the truthful feel he gives to *A Man Escaped* but which also explains – perhaps – that by the age of 44, his hair was prematurely grey. He lived on the Île St Louis in the centre of Paris for many decades and the frequent presence of stairs in *Pickpocket* – 'as good a space as a room' – surely reflects his own going up and down them. Fascinating as it would be, no biography has been written yet, and perhaps he would be content with this on the grounds that all his life and thought is in his films, and much of his own personal experience too.

**Fifthly**, he has a taste for classical literature. In 1971 he said that at the age of 17, he had read nothing, but that later he fell on Stendhal, Dickens, Dostoevsky at the same time as Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Max Jacob, Valéry, Montaigne and Proust ('especially his thoughts and his language'). While there is nothing strange in film-makers liking the classics, Bresson seems to have been unusually attracted to European literature and thought from previous centuries as if he saw himself in an important cultural tradition, both within the twentieth century (into which his life fitted perfectly, his dates being 1901 to 1999) and yet outside it.

He is very guarded about his fellow film-makers. While admitting in 1987 that he used in the 1920s and 1930s to go to the cinema a lot, by the late 1950s he claimed never to go. This may have been his way of deflecting requests for his views on particular film-makers, but it is possibly true too since by then he had become exasperated with the theatrical nature of contemporary films. We can glean that Chaplin seems to have fascinated him (in spite of Chaplin's music-hall style) and in 1966 he spoke of his admiration for Buster Keaton's 'mathematical precision', possibly prompted in this not because he had seen Keaton in his youth but by the 1960s rediscovery – and revelation – of Keaton. Much more problematic is Carl Dreyer, about the only film-maker to get a mention (disapproving) in the 'Notes'. In fact a whole film course on the merits or otherwise of Bresson's anti-system could be built around a comparison of the two men's films, especially Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* alongside Bresson's *Trial of Joan of Arc*. In 1963 he is prepared to be complimentary for the way Dreyer 'interiorized' his protagonists and in so doing 'did good service to cinematography', but in 1966 he describes himself 'at the antipodes of Dreyer' for the use he makes of theatrical means, and for his interiorization achieved by voice effects, gestures and the 'mimicry' of professional actors, all of which he of course rejected. He did admit in 1946 that Lean's *Brief Encounter* was an admirable film, but most of the time, like a hermit crab, he stays in his shell. 'What do you think of Hitchcock?' 'Cahiers du Cinéma' asked in 1957. 'I have never seen his films,' Bresson replied, presumably with the impassivity that characterises the speech of his models in the films.

Hitchcock's reputation is founded in part on his brilliant story-boarding, a method which still left room for creativity in the actual shoot. So precise and exact in his methods, Bresson might be thought of as the same, yet the **sixth** thing to take from this book is the importance to him of improvisation, of taking time on the set to take time off while he pondered how to solve a particular creative problem, to develop an idea, to change what he had planned or add something he had not. He had a fear of the mechanical, which ties in nicely with his Catholicism. On several occasions he refers to the role both of predestination and of chance in

human lives. His initial, perhaps preferred title, for *A Man Escaped* was *Aide-toi . . . (sc.le ciel t'aidera)*, i.e. 'if you help yourself, Heaven will help you too.' His use of improvisation on the set may therefore be deliberate, to set aside the 'predestined' script for the role of 'chance' – or grace perhaps – in assisting him to make the film. His anti-system is of course unHitchcockian too. A favoured word to describe his method is *dépouillement* in the sense of 'stripping [to essentials]', the use of meiosis rather than hyperbole, a horror of pleonasm. Hence his conclusion, articulated in 1968, that the true act of creation is in the mixing of the images with the soundtrack, 'the moment when all the elements of the film, aural and visual, placed one with another, act on each other, and transform each other'.

## CONCLUSION

Do these interviews give us not just a bottle of champagne, but a veritable magnum? Assuredly, especially when combined with the photos, many of which have hardly seen the light of day before now. Particularly good to have are the transcriptions of the four interviews from France Inter's long-running cultural programme, 'Le Masque et la Plume', the first in 1960, the fourth in 1975. However, the magnum is not quite filled to the top. There is no index for a start; nor is any context given for the interviews. Missing are the transcripts of his filmed interviews, especially the hour-long one made with François Weyergans in March 1965 (*Robert Bresson: ni vu, ni connu*, made in 1965 for the series 'Cinéastes de notre temps'), and constituting in effect a draft version of the 'Notes' which were only published ten years later. He was also filmed on other occasions being interviewed by journalists. Because we are rescued by YouTube, where some of these items may be found (and where there is a particular pleasure in seeing Bresson in person – and hearing his voice, which he teaches us is such a key part of human personality), these omissions are less regrettable than the missing interviews with American critics, Charles Thomas Samuels in 1970 printed in Thomas's 'Encountering Directors' (1972), Ronald Hayman for the 'Transatlantic Review' in 1973, and Paul Schrader, who was yet to direct his first film, in 1976. But even here our regret is mitigated by the fact that the Samuels and Schrader interviews are included in 'Robert Bresson (Revised)' edited by James Quandt (Toronto International Film Festival Cinematheque 2011). The Schrader piece has a particular quality in being unabashed about the religious aspect of the films – eliciting from Bresson the information that he has difficulty in attending church 'when these people are making their new mass', suggesting a divergence not just between him and the Church, but when linked with his last three films possibly between him and faith. The CS Thomas interview is particularly important because Thomas is both acute in his questioning and on occasion inept, yet both approaches succeed in bringing Bresson out into the open so that the interview gives us several nuggets: for example, that as a POW he had heard someone being whipped through a door, and then heard the body fall – an experience which surely fed into his belief that the ear is much more creative than the eye; that dubbing is wrong because 'the voice sums a person up as nothing else can'; that he had always liked manual dexterity from a young age when he 'made balancing toys, juggled, etc.'; that in his rural childhood he had hunted animals in the way that opens *Mouchette*; that 'there are no real atheists' (a sentiment he does not elaborate); that in *Pickpocket* he makes Michel aware of the presence of God for three minutes – 'few people can say they were aware of God even that long'; that suicide is losing its sinfulness for him – 'to be aware of a certain emptiness can make life impossible.' And it also leads to a comic exasperation towards the very end. Question: 'Why do so many of your actors walk about with their eyes cast downwards?' Bresson: 'They are looking at the chalk marks.'

These omissions are not serious if one thinks of this book as 'Selected Interviews', best supplemented by reference to the list of interviews given in the Calgary University website (webmeister Trond Trondsen) devoted to Bresson: <http://people.ucalgary.ca/~tstronds/robert-bresson.com/Bibliography/Bresson.html#interv>. A more serious fault is that in some cases less integral versions of the interviews seem to have been used. In 1983 'American Film' published a version of an interview with Michel Ciment. This next appears in 1996 in the magazine 'Positif' with which Ciment has long been associated (so why was it not published there first of all?), an English version of which was included in

'Projections 9: French Film-makers on Film-making' (Faber and Faber, London 1999). Finally it was reproduced in its full glory (I hope) in 'Robert Bresson (Revised)' in 2011. Coming as it does right at the end of his career, Bresson delivers a magisterial valediction, but regrettably the version in 'Entretiens' is both truncated and with the questions slightly reordered, entailing a definite loss. Equally dismaying has been the loss of the Pascal reference in the sublime 'Cahiers' interview of 1966 in which Godard plays a leading role. When Bresson said Pascal is so important for him, but that he is important for everyone, he did it as a way of batting away the Jansenist label, or rather putting it in a much larger context. Has this excision been made for the sake of clarity? Yet it has meant a definite loss of truthfulness, of profundity even.

Yet the book's cumulative impression, as one observes this acute mind at work, is of its considerable importance. For the study of Bresson certainly, and for an appreciation of cinema in the twentieth century. But also for its insight into a crucial strand of European culture, faith facing up to the absence of God. The words of the poet Geoffrey Hill in 'Christmas Trees' on the martyred Dietrich Bonhoeffer come to mind:

*his words are quiet but not too quiet  
we hear too late or not too late.*

The lines can be well applied to Bresson too: despite his protestations that he does not wish to preach, that he wants to be neutral, his films clinically dissect human weakness – and boil at what he finds. His courteous eloquence on display in this book only reinforces the message.

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